

Los Angeles

NEW: Hokusai | Milk | The Penthouse | Eleven | e3rd Steakhouse

Dine

[REVIEW]

A Slice Above

L.A.'s got more than its fair share of Italian restaurants, but All'Angelo is worth making room for BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY

[REVIEW]

A Slice Above

L.A.'s got more than its fair share of Italian restaurants, but All'Angelo is worth making room for BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY

A four-foot-high polished chrome and black enamel contraption with the lines of an antique Singer sewing machine gleams in the back of All'Angelo's dining room. Electric meat slicers, All'Angelo co-owner Stefano Ongaro will tell you, heat up as they work, and the blade dries out the meat. A vintage Berkel, on the other hand, made in Italy and worth upwards of \$15,000, has a near-magical connection to its salumi, spinning out almost translucent sheaths with precise and compassionate care. Having a meticulously restored 1921 hand-operated Berkel in full view makes a subliminal announcement about All'Angelo's intent: This is a kitchen that genuflects proudly to Italian tradition.

No cuisine has been as assimilated into the American diet as Italy's. We grew up on spaghetti and meatballs, a dish so institutionalized it even comes in a can. We eat 350 slices of pizza per second as a nation, 100 acres per day. Some are topped with peanut butter and jelly. If we don't get the pies delivered, we can find them in the supermarket freezer with extra meat and cheese tunneling through fashion-forward crusts. The immediacy and informality of Italian food—which isn't subject to painstaking manipulations or architectural constructs—are particularly suited to Los Angeles. "People here," says Ongaro, "want to eat well, and they don't mind paying the money. They just don't want to wear a suit." We save our pretension for movies and red carpet galas; day to day we dress up in T-shirts and jeans and have little patience for baroque snootiness. Overgilded French restaurants tend to expire (au revoir, L'Orangerie), while high-end Italians some-

how avoid the sense of stuffiness and proliferate. Vincenti begat Angelini (not far from Evan Kleiman's Angeli, which is not far from All'Angelo, so one had best be specific about dining plans), which begat La Terza. After leaving Italian-tinged Campanile, Nancy Silverton started Mozza with Mario Batali, and their adjacent osteria is due in July. The Drago brothers own eight successful restaurants, from Santa Monica to Pasadena, and Valentino, the godfather of them all, has recently



PINWHEELS: Guinea hen stuffed with sausage



TABLE MANNER: The night's specials are relayed.

MAY 2007 ★ \$4.95

0 5 >



74851 19220

ree

National Park

had a face-lift. Countless middlebrow family spots have adapted the Italian ideal with straw-wrapped Chianti bottles, canisters of pulverized Parmesan, and soft knots of garlic bread warmed in the microwave. Unlike other U.S. cities, we don't have a Little Italy—although Brentwood could make a play for the title with its restaurant lineup. We've spread our Italian fare throughout the city.

Ongaro was born in Venice, Italy, and was touring Canada with a pro baseball team when a shoulder injury derailed his pitching career. He moved to Los Angeles because he had friends here and, at 27, got a job as a busboy at Valentino. He stayed for 14 years, moving up to become the restaurant's maître d'. By the time he left in 2002, to serve as a wine consultant and GM at Enoteca Drago, a Beverly Hills wine bar, his shaven head was well known among a dining elite. He went on to revitalize the front of the house at Il Grano, and in January, after becoming a U.S. citizen, Ongaro opened his dream restaurant. "It was time," he says, "for me to call my own shots."

All'Angelo is small—75 seats, not including four stools at the tiny bar. The walls have the ocher sponged look that's designer shorthand for Italian villa, and the room, sophisticated and comfortable, is decidedly absent of pyrotechnics. The waitstaff are professional and unobtrusive. (One server, though, did a shameless water upsell, dumping the whole table's glasses of tap water and substituting Pellegrino when a single person asked for sparkling. Two bottles later he'd added \$12 to the bill.) Chef Mirko Paderno's food deserves to be the sole focus. Paderno is from Milan, and he, too, has done his time in our better-known Italian outposts: Valentino, the defunct Trio in Pasadena, and then Dolce in Hollywood. His last stint was at Bridge, the restaurant on La Cienega launched by the owners of Koi. "This,"



CUTTING UP: Chef Mirko Paderno and the vintage Berkel meat slicer

Paderno says, "is the first time I can cook what I want to cook."

Despite the Berkel's prominent placement, the salumi plate isn't on the menu, and waiters didn't mention it on my visits. Order whatever Paderno's slicing, and nosh on it while perusing the menu. The mild pale *porchetta*, purchased from his uncle, a butcher in Milan, is rimmed with fat that melts on the tongue like a Communion wafer; the wine-colored duck prosciutto has an elegant gaminess; and the *jamón serrano* may not be Italian, but it's delicate, barely salted, and so finely sliced it maintains its loft even when piled. The meat is accompanied by pieces of lightly broiled bread tucked into a napkin. It's a beautiful array.

No pizzas, *tricolore* salads, *bolognese* or

alla checca dishes are offered at All'Angelo, which is named for Ongaro's father. Instead, the menu concentrates on regional specialties: some reminiscent of the partners' childhoods, some wrested from their mothers, others just favorites gathered from travels around the country. One of the boldest appetizers is also the best, the tripe braised parmigiana style, a persuasive ambassador for organ consumption. After simmering for four hours, the meat—if stomach lining qualifies as such—abandons its resilience and becomes so soft it could be mistaken for pasta. It stocks a spicy and piping hot tomato-based stew topped with triangles of grilled polenta, a northern Italian staple. The heat, the texture, the rusticity of the sauce, and the sweet corn of the polenta are all cross-cultural comfort triggers. Combined, they evoke a sense of nostalgia; even if you've never had anything quite like this dish, it still smacks of home-spun familiarity.

The cleanest, most California inclined of the appetizers, a Maine lobster salad with frisée and wild fennel, features butter-poached meat and a claw so ridiculously tender, a fork glides through it. More interesting, though, is a cauliflower timbale with mascarpone, the subtle earthy essence of cauliflower ingeniously reconstituted in spoonable form. Thin, crackling skin and juicy meat distinguish a roasted quail with sautéed mushrooms. The only starter that seems somehow incomplete is the *treviso*, grilled more on some nights than

At a Glance*

ALL'ANGELO // 7166 MELROSE AVENUE // HOLLYWOOD

BEST DISHES: *Salumi* plate, roasted quail with sautéed *pioppini*, tripe braised parmigiana style and grilled polenta, cauliflower timbale with mascarpone sauce, *garganelli* with braised beef and Gaeta olives, stuffed guinea hen, monkfish crusted with tomato and olives on *caponata*, caramelized Meyer lemon and polenta pudding with lemon sabayon. **WINE LIST:** Smart selection for neophytes and oenophiles. Beer and wine. **ATMOSPHERE:** Sedate but comfortable. **NOISE LEVEL:** Low. **KID FRIENDLINESS:** Not particularly suited to kids. **PRICE RANGE:** \$10 to \$36 per dish. **HOURS:** Lunch 12-2:30, Mon.-Fri.; dinner 6-10, Mon.-Thu., and 6-11, Fri.-Sat. **PARKING:** Valet, \$6. **RESERVATIONS:** Required. **CREDIT CARDS:** Amex, MasterCard, Visa. **CONTACT:** 323-933-9540 or allangelo.com

on others, bathed in a “vegetable emulsion” that tastes mostly of aged balsamic vinegar.

Paderno's pastas, made in-house, are substantial enough for a main course, and he's playful with their ingredients. I regret not having a venison ravioli with pumpkin and mascarpone when it was offered, because it was gone by the following visit. A white wine sauce licked with olive oil binds the *chitarra spaghetti*, which is chock full of sweet langoustine meat. Heartier is a *garganelli* with braised beef, Gaeta olives, and a tomato sauce mellowed and deepened with the braising juices. The dishes enunciate Paderno's forte: elevating the concepts of a farmhouse *cucina* into something finer without succumbing to preciousness.

With the entrées, or *secondi piatti*, Paderno piggybacks spicy and acidic flavors onto more neutral foils: Pinwheels of guinea hen wrap around peppery house-made pork sausage and black truffles; a shellac of dried tomatoes and olives tops a monkfish fillet slipped onto a bed of *caponata*; coarsely ground shrimp and eggplant threaten to burst through the thin, pliant walls of a calamari dish. The exuberance of the Mediterranean radiates from each preparation. Rather than rephrase his recipes for Angeleno palates, Paderno maintains their integrity—we aren't eating a wan, American-



CORNY: Lemon-polenta *budino*

ized version of an Italian specialty; we're beaming over to an outdoor café in a seaside port or the sort of hillside trattoria a traveler might stumble upon on a road trip from Venice to Milan. An Italian meal is about conversation, primal flavors, and unbridled pleasure, all of which abound at All'Angelo.

For dessert, the kitchen elbows its way past the usual cartons of gelato and fridge-parked tiramisu to come up with a transporting *budino di pane al limone*, a polenta bread pudding of sorts with a caramelized Meyer lemon sauce and candied citrus peel. Lemon sabayon melts down the side of the warm con-

fection. A small flourless chocolate torte with a cocoa meringue and a crispy cocoa cookie that's not at all sweet manages to hit a range of chocolate notes and textures. One dish that I'd deny a visa to is the *tartufo al cioccolato*, a chocolate panettone—I've never understood that cake, always dry and somehow tough despite all those air pockets—with Chianti-soaked cherries.

Ongaro has pulled together a strong wine list, a collection of 400 labels from Italy, Germany, Hungary, and California. Bottles like the Spring Mountain 2001 Elivette, a harmonious convergence of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, and petit verdot, exemplify his years of experience at such wine-centric restaurants as Valentino and Enoteca Drago. Twenty labels—including affordable *proseccos* and a deep, round San Silvestro Patres Barolo that tastes like Italy in stemware—are served by the glass or half glass. A fancy Cruvinet system intubates the bottles to prevent the wine from oxidizing between pours.

So far, All'Angelo seems filled with friends. At the end of the night, Paderno, still in his toque and whites, is likely to be seated at one table; Ongaro, in a chocolate brown jacket that matches the decor, at another. The cadences of Italy, its vocabulary and its spirit, rise and fall as coffee is poured from a brass kettle. ■